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ABSTRACT

Recommendations to improve quality in undergraduate study while maintaining access are offered that would involve statewide entry and exit standards and better preparation of students to meet the standards. Evidence suggests that an estimated 40 to 50 percent of entering freshmen will be referred to remedial education, and colleges may be granting degrees to students who lack basic academic skills. The recommendations to improve undergraduate education are directed to three areas: beginning college-level work; student achievement and outcomes; and faculty and curriculum. States are advised to improve the readiness of students to begin college work by such measures as: requiring that higher education establish statewide standards for placement in credit courses; requiring that threshold placement standards and assessment procedures be consistent statewide; and ensuring that students not qualified to begin degree-credit study have geographical access to programs that will prepare them to qualify. It is also recommended that standards of academic progress be adopted and that colleges should specify skills/knowledge students need for the bachelor's degree. Proposed ways to strengthen the curriculum and the faculty reward system, which would involve faculty and presidential leadership, are also offered. (SW)

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Access to Quality Undergraduate Education

A Report to
The Southern Regional Education Board by Its
Commission for Educational Quality

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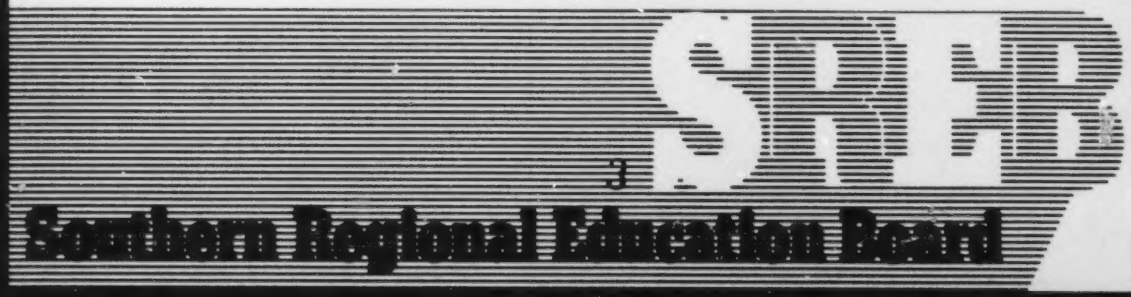

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Foreword

Undergraduate education is the most important form of higher education. The highest level of study achieved by most postsecondary students is either the associate or baccalaureate degree. This means that the knowledge, skills, and values imparted by the undergraduate curriculum must serve a lifetime. Undergraduate education also prepares students to enter graduate and professional programs. Collegiate standards send clear signals to the public schools about the expected level of achievement; high standards challenge secondary school students to higher levels of preparation. It is equally important to remember that the quality of public school teachers depends greatly upon the quality of undergraduate education.

This report to SREB from its Commission for Educational Quality recommends specific ways to meet an urgent priority—the improvement of undergraduate education. The statement differs from the recent reports by several national groups in that it suggests that involvement of the full range of responsible interests will be needed to improve undergraduate education. In addition to college and university leaders, who naturally should take the primary responsibility and initiative, there are important roles for state policymakers in causing or expecting certain actions to be taken, and then holding the higher education community accountable.

The importance and urgency of such improvements make this a time for realizing joint responsibility—everyone has a stake in the success of undergraduate education.

Winfred L. Godwin
President

A New Covenant: Access to Quality

Need to raise quality

There is no question that the quality of undergraduate education is unacceptably low and needs to be raised. In the past six months, three independent national reports reached remarkably similar conclusions on the status of undergraduate education—all pointed to an incoherent curriculum, a lack of rigor in course and degree standards, inadequate methods of assessing student progress, and little consensus within higher education on what knowledge and skills should be emphasized.

The reasons for the decline in the quality of undergraduate education are understandable. Chief among them was the pressure, beginning in the 1960s, for improved access to higher education for large numbers of students who previously lacked the means and encouragement to receive education after high school. The access movement was a high public priority, far-reaching and deep-rooted socially, and was implemented with powerful political support. A diverse but strong alliance of the public, its political leaders, and higher education forged what quickly became a covenant to expand opportunity to all who could benefit from higher education.

Access remains a high priority

The issue of access has dominated higher education since the 1960s. Quality became a secondary concern, in part because the early covenant did not specify standards for the programs to which access should be provided. As the drive for access grew, most institutions relaxed entry requirements to include no more than the high school diploma. As a way of extending access to all levels of higher education, faculty and administrators lowered standards for courses, student promotion, and graduation. The quality and meaning of undergraduate education has fallen to a point at which mere access has lost much of its value.

Access should be a highly significant social and economic force, but it will not be unless it is access to quality education. Achieving this, however, will be difficult, and will depend greatly on the extent to which quality improvement is seen as a necessary means to

make access to higher education truly meaningful. Already, some challenge the recent emphasis on quality as a swing away from the commitment to access; others speak in terms that emphasize only access, or only quality, or generalities of how they should be combined. The greatest challenge is to find ways that will enable both access and quality goals to be met at the same time for the same students.

New covenant needed

Pursuing both goals will require a new covenant to be formed among the public, its political representatives, and higher education. The same kind of public and political support that initiated the great advances in access must now focus on an equally difficult challenge—improving quality while maintaining access. Because access is now a high, deeply-embedded, public priority, efforts to improve quality that appear to restrict educational opportunity will be challenged by many social, political, and educational leaders. It is important, therefore, that quality improvement actions and policies be developed jointly, involving the same groups that were party to the earlier understandings. There needs to be close agreement across all levels and groups of policymakers and educators about how undergraduate education will be improved while access is maintained. It is vital that the issue of achieving access to quality education become a state-level concern.

The new covenant between higher education and the public will have to contain practical, understandable, and explainable approaches to pursuing quality and access simultaneously. These agreements should be formalized in state-level policy, which has both the leverage and jurisdiction to ensure that students seeking collegiate study can obtain the services they need without compromising efforts to improve quality.

Clear standards are essential

The policies emerging from the new covenant should be drawn from two fundamental imperatives. The first is to restore clear standards arranged in a meaningful sequence to the entire educational system—from kindergarten through high school through higher education. This is essential to the improvement of quality. Students should be expected to qualify for study at the next educational level, with qualification depending upon satisfaction of clearly stated performance criteria at major entry and exit points, such as high school graduation, college entry, promotion to upper-level undergraduate study, and college graduation.

Emphasizing effective preparation

The second imperative is to place greater emphasis on the effective preparation of students to meet significant entry and exit standards so that they can gain access to ever-higher levels of education. Access need not mean the geographical and financial availability of undergraduate education without regard to standards, but the availability of such education with standards, supported by programs at prior levels that prepare students to meet these criteria. In shifting the means for providing access from a lowering of standards to increased preparation to meet higher requirements, the importance of preparation and qualification in producing quality education while supporting educational opportunity is restored.

Improving Quality

Research indicates that the average community college freshman is reading at the 8th grade level and that 60 percent of entering students in community colleges, 35 percent in regional institutions, and 10 percent in universities need further preparation.* Recent estimates in Georgia, Florida, Tennessee, Louisiana, and Mississippi show that in all these states approximately 40 percent of the students entering college require remedial education.

College students lack basic skills

Recognition of the inadequate preparation of college freshmen is especially clear in the few states that have statewide standards for placement into degree-credit work that go beyond course requirements for a high school diploma, represent actual academic skills and achievement, and apply to both senior and two-year colleges. These requirements usually are low—for example, 740 on the SAT, 14 on the ACT, and 10th grade reading level. Nonetheless, estimates are that 40 to 50 percent of all entering freshmen will be referred to remedial education. More and more states and institutions are examining how many of their entering college students are unprepared. These states and institutions are to be commended, for, while the results are alarming, they are a step closer to tackling the problems.

*John E. Roueche, George A. Baker, and Suanne D. Roueche, *College Responses to Low-Achieving Students: A National Study* (Orlando, Florida: HBJ Media Systems Corporation, 1984).

The evidence invites public skepticism concerning the quality of higher education, and suggests that colleges and universities may be awarding degrees to students who do not possess even basic academic skills. College-level testing programs of sophomores and juniors have shown that large numbers of students are not able—especially on the first try--to pass low level tests of basic skills and knowledge. Pre-professional tests required by some states for entrance into certain upper-division undergraduate programs indicate that many students have inadequate basic skills. Teacher certification tests reveal that many college graduates lack minimum competencies. And, increasing numbers of employers complain that the communication and computation skills of college graduates are deficient. The knowledge that many of the students who failed these tests have received passing grades and, in many cases, a baccalaureate degree is disquieting.

Beginnings toward improvement

Improving the quality of undergraduate education is difficult. We may be at a point, however, at which the public and higher education are ready to act together. There is a growing recognition by higher education leaders of the current problems. In addition, public school reforms have built a general momentum to improve, and soon they will be providing better prepared students to higher education.

Of great significance to improvement initiatives is that more leaders from minority and disadvantaged backgrounds are recognizing that mere access to undergraduate education and its formal degrees has less value when the quality and meaning of undergraduate education are diminished. Indeed, disadvantaged students recently enrolling in college have suffered most from the decline in quality. As the public perceives a widening gap between the relatively few colleges with high standards and those with lower ones, students who attend the latter institutions, in effect, do not experience genuine equality of opportunity.

Actions to Improve Undergraduate Education

Higher education responsible for improvements

Quality undergraduate education is possible, and should have a primary role at every college and university. Its improvement requires comprehensive reforms enacted at institutional and statewide levels. Faculty and administrators in higher education should initiate many of these changes, since undergraduate education centers on the relationship between students and faculty. Lay boards of trustees, both at institutional and statewide levels, have a major responsibility for these improvements, which in some cases must be preceded by a reordering of institutional priorities. And, political leaders need to ensure that these issues are being addressed by those responsible for public and institutional policies for higher education.

State-level policy initiated by agencies and offices with authority in public education can make an important contribution. State actions are needed to ensure access within the public system, to provide for programs offering opportunities for additional preparation, to encourage special linkages between the schools and colleges, and to provide accountability to the public for at least minimum levels of student performance.

State role in achieving change

While most of the recommendations below are aimed at both the public and private sectors of higher education, those suggesting state-level or statewide actions refer primarily to the public two-year and four-year institutions. Nevertheless, independent colleges may be affected by those statewide policies, especially in light of the support private institutions receive from student aid programs financed through state taxes.

As a general principle, the responsibility for initiating improvements in undergraduate education should reside with higher education institutions and their governing boards. The need to improve undergraduate education is so critical, however, that this is not a time for squabbles over responsibility. It is a time when concerted actions by both campus and state leaders will be required.

The discussions and recommendations that follow are fundamental to the improvement of undergraduate education and are directed in three areas—beginning college-level work; student achievement and outcomes; and faculty and curriculum.

Beginning College-Level Work

Student Qualifications

College placement standards

Standards for beginning degree-credit work in college can be an important indicator of quality in higher education, particularly when they drop to a point at which students are admitted who cannot learn on the college level. There is now strong documentation that conditions for placement into degree-credit work are extremely low, leading to high dropout rates, or forcing faculty, in an attempt to meet the needs of the unprepared, to aim their courses at a level that cheats the prepared students.

Skills needed for college-level study

There is no common understanding of what skills are needed to begin college-level work, and no consensus on what college-level work is or how to identify students that require additional preparation before beginning college. The result is that in some cases the low achievement of poorly prepared students is masked because degree-earning credit is granted for remedial-level work, thus diluting the meaning of the baccalaureate. Most would agree that as common standards for beginning college-level work —standards pertaining to basic skills, not only high school courses—are established across institutions,the number of students recognized as needing remedial work will increase markedly, even when these standards admittedly are low.

College-level or Remedial Placement

Higher education has been slow to acknowledge that too much of what is credited as college work is not. College-level academic work has come to imply any course taken by students in college. College study needs to be reestablished in all institutions as a form of higher learning, with courses that demand learning and thinking skills above the high school level for all students.

Defining college-level work

Standards are needed that address basic academic skills, such as reading and writing. These skill standards should go beyond course requirements for the high school diploma to ensure that students can benefit from an upgraded college curriculum, and that faculty are not presented with an impossible range of learning abilities. These criteria should reflect learning skills that are needed to begin degree-credit work. Any course taken by students without these skills would not be termed college-level, thus ensuring that the first two years of undergraduate education are at college, not remedial, levels. Ensuring that students have the basic skills needed to begin college will do more than any other action to improve the retention of students in college.

The purpose of remedial education is to prepare students for collegiate degree work at the freshman level. Clarifying placement in college work is especially critical to improving the quality of undergraduate education in the community colleges, which provide the first two years of a baccalaureate education to a large number of students. It is important to the reputations of both students and colleges that the academic transfer programs of the two-year colleges are seen as truly college level.

Access Through Further Preparation

Ensuring access while stressing preparation

Setting clear criteria for qualification for degree-credit work in college is a first step to improved quality. To maintain access as these standards are implemented, states will need to provide opportunities for students to gain qualifying skills through programs that are readily available, geographically and financially. To ensure access, the increased emphasis on preparation will require statewide action on two fronts—before a student graduates from high school; and after graduation, but before entering college, if a student needs further preparation.

In addition to raising high school curricular and graduation requirements and publicizing the skills necessary to start college-level work, several states are now encouraging higher education to work closely with secondary schools to improve the preparation of students while they are still in high school. These efforts include improved teacher education, joint reviews of high school curricula,

diagnostic testing, and early intervention and remediation of high school students.

Before high school graduation

A good example of these pre-high school graduation activities is the Ohio State Early Testing Program, now supported by the Ohio Board of Regents. High school juniors take a version of the college mathematics placement test that is used by all participating state institutions. The program identifies weaknesses in students while they still have another year for taking additional mathematics courses. In addition, university faculty and high school teachers have developed a model college preparatory course designed for students who score exceptionally low on the placement examination. The Early English Composition Assessment Program, which addresses student readiness for college writing, is currently under development by university and secondary school English faculties.

While it is reasonable to expect that students are prepared for college before they graduate from high school, all states will be faced for some time with high school graduates who are not qualified to meet the higher college placement requirements. If we are to hold to these standards, which are so necessary to improving the quality of undergraduate education, and still maintain access to higher education, states will have to ensure that programs are available to provide additional preparation to those high school graduates who are not qualified to begin collegiate degree-credit work.

Additional preparation after high school

These supplemental preparatory programs, although not college level, may be offered best through colleges, particularly community colleges in states that have a highly accessible two-year college system. Locating these programs in colleges would make subsequent placement in the degree-credit curriculum more convenient. Students would be placed in these remedial programs if, after being admitted to college, formal assessments show they do not meet the statewide minimum requirements established for degree-credit study. To maintain the value of the undergraduate degree, these preparatory programs would not carry credit toward a collegiate degree.

The following recommendations are offered to provide access to higher quality undergraduate education by improving the abilities of students to begin college work:

1 States should require that higher education establish statewide standards for placement in collegiate courses creditable toward an undergraduate degree. These criteria should extend beyond the courses required for the high school diploma, and represent a consensus by higher education on the levels of basic academic skills needed to begin study at the college level, especially in reading, writing, and basic mathematics. Students who do not meet the minimum standards should be guided to non-degree-credit programs that provide further preparation.

2 States should require that the threshold placement standards and the procedures to assess them are consistent statewide. These requirements should be applied in all institutions offering undergraduate education, including the academic college-parallel programs in two-year colleges.

3 To maintain access under these new placement criteria, states should ensure that students not qualified to begin degree-credit study have geographical access to programs that will prepare them to qualify. These programs may be offered in higher education institutions, but should be distinct from degree-credit programs. Some states may elect to offer these preparatory programs through community colleges; other states may provide services in four-year institutions as well, especially in colleges admitting significant numbers of educationally disadvantaged students.

4 These supplemental preparatory programs should be fully accessible financially. States should support the programs through a separate category of state appropriations. Financial aid for students should be available for the additional preparation, meaning that eligibility for federal and state financial aid should be extended to up to five years.

5 The resources of higher education and the schools should be joined to study and determine the most effective ways of providing this additional preparation. Content guidelines, outcomes standards, and assessments should be developed which, at a minimum, reflect the skills needed to begin collegiate study. The guidelines, standards, and evaluations should be applied statewide.

6 Higher education should initiate close working relationships with the public schools to enrich the preparation of students before they leave high school. Colleges and universities should apply some of their own resources to help more students qualify for true college-level study immediately upon graduation from high school. The goal is for states to begin a trend which sees fewer students in post-high school remedial programs as more students are better prepared in the high schools. Higher education should work closely with the public schools in the following areas:

- Defining and publicizing the nature of courses which should be taken and the academic skills that should be developed to prepare for college.
- Developing early assessments of the skills of high school students to identify when performance indicates they will not be able to meet the standards to qualify for degree-credit work in college.
- Developing the capacity to intervene in and enrich the programs of high school students who are projected not to meet the college placement criteria. The early intervention strategy developed by Ohio State University may be a model to be considered for replication.
- Informing each public school district of the collegiate performance of its graduates, especially the numbers requiring remedial work before placement in college-level study.

Student Progress and Achievement

The improvement of undergraduate education depends upon the establishment of new standards not only at entry, but also during and at exit from college. Restoring quality to education requires the presence of successively higher standards as the student begins college, advances through higher levels of study, and graduates from college.

Ensuring important academic outcomes

There are certain skills and knowledge that all undergraduate students should possess. Some should be present upon entry to enable further learning; higher levels of these skills, or others, should be developed as the student progresses through the curriculum, and ultimately graduates. Institutions are responsible for ensuring that students achieve appropriate levels of skill in reading, writing, mathematics, and critical thinking at certain points in the undergraduate experience. Today, there is little assurance this is happening. Course grades are not reliable indicators of important student outcomes. Few institutions now require comprehensive examinations or other kinds of evaluations that assess general learning or skills, which go beyond a specific course or discipline. This situation should be changed to assure the public that certain basic skills and knowledge are being attained, and to encourage faculty and students to develop these fundamental outcomes.

Standards of academic progress

In no sense should these basic academic outcomes or the required threshold standards be seen as the only important results of an undergraduate education. Indeed, there are many other skills and knowledge at higher orders and levels that are outgrowths of the undergraduate experience. Certain outcomes are so basic, however, that their development has to be guaranteed or else undergraduate education has no meaning. In time, course grades and other institutionally developed standards and measures may, once again, attest to these outcomes. In the meantime, and to help restore consensus on the nature and level of student achievement to be expected in undergraduate education, it is critical that institutions as a group define certain basic academic skills and use similar assessments, in addition to course grading, to evaluate student proficiency. Minimum standards for these skills should be set for promotion from lower division to upper-level study. These requirements will not produce excellence, but they will provide a foundation on which institutions can establish higher standards and build toward true excellence.

The following recommendations are offered to improve undergraduate student achievement:

7 States should expect colleges and universities to adopt a set of basic academic skills and levels of proficiency that all students should possess by the end of the sophomore year and before beginning upper-division study. This set of skills and the procedures to assess them should be common statewide, and used by all two-year and senior colleges and universities. Faculty should have the major role in defining these skills and standards.

8 Students should be expected to exceed these threshold requirements, whose central purpose should be to provide a basis for accountability and a foundation upon which individual institutions can construct higher standards.

9 Each college and university should specify the academic skills and knowledge that students should possess before receiving the baccalaureate degree. Each institution also should develop its own ways to evaluate prospective graduates on the extent to which these outcomes are present.

Faculty and Curriculum

Faculty and presidents hold keys to quality

There is no shortcut to achieving quality. The rigor with which teaching and learning are undertaken determines the quality of undergraduate education. When able and committed faculty set and maintain high standards, they challenge students to develop the abilities that have always marked an educated person—facility in spoken and written communication, knowledge of basic mathematics, logical thinking, the capacity for inquiry, and the capability to make sound and critical judgments. Such skills are learned and developed only through strenuous and monitored practice throughout the curriculum. There is no way to avoid this exacting process.

Faculty, through defining and teaching the curriculum, hold the most important keys to improving undergraduate education. Quality in undergraduate education is related directly to a demanding and challenging curriculum, and to the devotion of faculty to teaching. Strengthening the teaching-learning relationship between

faculty and students is vital. Although faculty allegiance to the professional discipline has grown, authority over the curriculum and faculty activity resides traditionally at the institutional and academic department levels. It is appropriate, then, that institutions and their lay governing boards respond to the imperatives set forth by the recent national reports on improving undergraduate education (which were authored by higher education leaders). Presidential and dean-level leadership is crucial in encouraging faculty to raise the priority of undergraduate teaching and to give it as much status and attention as research now receives.

Strengthening the curriculum

The college curriculum needs to be examined to ensure that the experiences provide the opportunities and challenges that will enable students to develop college-level skills and knowledge. It is important that presidents and faculty lead institutional efforts to recast curriculum based on a consensus of what all college students should know and be able to do.

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill provides an example of efforts to establish certain academic skills (for example, writing and mathematics) as the basis for university study and to identify specific core courses for all students. The new curriculum emphasizes the development of various ways of knowing and the ability to integrate knowledge.

The following recommendations, along with the call for presidential and faculty leadership, are offered to the higher education community to highlight the critical curricular and faculty issues involved in improving undergraduate education:

10 Institutions should examine their undergraduate curriculum and recast a core of required studies in the directions and toward the purposes recommended by the recent report of the Association of American Colleges. That report recognizes that both skills and knowledge are important outcomes in undergraduate education and that faculty must take the responsibility to set the curriculum. Exemplary institutional reforms should be encouraged and replicated.

11 Basic academic skills, such as reading and writing, should be expected and practiced across all segments of the curriculum. The development of student proficiency in these skills is the responsibility of all faculty.

12 The humanities and sciences should constitute a major segment of the undergraduate core curriculum.

13 The undergraduate core curriculum should be similar across the academic transfer programs of two-year institutions and the senior colleges and universities. Faculty from the two sectors should develop these curricula jointly, and compare information about the success of two-year college transfer students relative to students who began their undergraduate studies at a senior institution.

14 The faculty reward system for compensation, promotion, and tenure should be revised to emphasize and recognize effective undergraduate teaching. Presidents, deans, and governing boards have the greatest leverage and authority to affect this system, which is now dominated by the individual disciplines and departments.

15 Different forms of activity should be valued in the faculty reward system. Colleges and universities should encourage and reward scholarship that directly improves the teaching of undergraduates by developing better ways to organize, understand, and present the knowledge of a discipline. Faculty, presidents, and deans can give credence to these activities which, while not producing purely new knowledge, certainly make current knowledge more understandable and able to be taught effectively.